

STEPHEN A. FOSTER HOUSE

12147 South Harvard Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
Submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks
November, 1986

STEPHEN A. FOSTER HOUSE
12147 South Harvard Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright

Date of Construction: 1900

Japanese art, architecture, and design have had a persistent influence in America since the middle of the nineteenth century. Except for the years of and immediately after World War II, this influence, which gained momentum after the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and after the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, both of which contained Japanese buildings and exhibits, has continued to today. Its most obvious impress has been on the design of the small American house of the last century, first in vacation homes and subsequently, as the size of single-family houses decreased, in year-round homes. As Clay Lancaster describes this trend in his *Japanese Influence in America* (1983), the seldom-used parlor turned into the multi-purpose living room, and the Japanese house, with its open interior spaces suitable for several uses and its minimal furniture, provided an inspiration and model.

The application of Japanese architecture and design principles is seen very clearly in the work of the Prairie school architects, from the style of their presentation drawings to the interest in fitting a building into its natural setting and providing appropriate landscaping to integrate nature and structure, to an open expression of the framing elements, the use of latticed windows, and overhanging roofs with deep eaves. The Japanese influence on the Prairie school came most directly through the movement's progenitor, Frank Lloyd Wright. Seeing Japanese buildings and other materials in Chicago in 1893 led him to begin collecting Japanese prints and in 1905 to visit Japan for the first time. He was also moved to design five buildings in 1900-01 that explicitly demonstrate the effect of his study of Japanese architecture. Three of these five buildings are summer homes and only one of the five is in the Chicago area. That building is the Stephen A. Foster House on the Far South Side of Chicago in the West Pullman neighborhood, built in 1900 for the newly married Foster, a member of the real estate syndicate developing West Pullman,

and his wife Almeda Hodges Foster. Its location, distant from the city center and from concentrations of Prairie school buildings, has led some writers on Wright to overlook the house, but it holds an important place in Wright's career and in the short list of his surviving work in Chicago.

Stephen Foster and Stewart Ridge

Stephen A. Foster was born in Vermont in 1866. After receiving a law degree from Harvard University in 1891, he practiced law in Boston for five years and came to Chicago in 1896. After a year in a law firm, he practiced on his own until 1906 when he served one year as an assistant attorney for the Sanitary District of Chicago. That same year, he was elected a judge of the newly established Municipal Court of Chicago. He returned to private practice in 1910 and wrote a book on the Municipal Court and a compilation of Sanitary District laws.

Foster was a director, and in 1900 vice-president and treasurer, of the West Pullman Land Association, a syndicate of Chicago, Boston, and New York men formed in 1891 to develop a tract of some 480 acres of land southwest of the town of Pullman. The association began subdividing and improving the property in 1892, planning for three types of development. Industrial activity was the core of West Pullman. A 1900 promotional booklet, *West Pullman and Stewart Ridge, Chicago, Illinois, 1892-1900*, describes in detail the already established manufacturing concerns and the prospects for the future. The association explained that the area was well served by freight and passenger railroads which ran to the Loop or to the South Side elevated train. Streets, sidewalks, and other infrastructure improvements such as water, sewers, gas and electric lines were installed to attract industries of all types.

Around the industrial zone, land was platted for inexpensive residential and commercial development. Homes could be built by factory workers or by a building company for resale. This area, the promoters wrote, provides "every opportunity for cheap, good and contented living." The security of an investment in West Pullman was assured because, as the booklet states in bold type:

The laboring people living there own their own homes and are contented. No strike or serious labor difficulty has ever been known in West Pullman. The laboring people have their lodges and societies, but aggressive or offensive organizations are unknown. There is not a union factory or shop in the town.

The labor turmoil that had occurred in the nearby company town of Pullman in 1894 would not occur in a neighborhood of mortgage-paying homeowners, the association implied.

When laying out their development, the association set aside the eastern part of their

land, which was heavily wooded and elevated above the rest of West Pullman, "exclusively for the finer class of residences." The association had established building restrictions for all its lots according to their relative value within the development. The most stringent were imposed on this most valuable property, named Stewart Ridge, in order to assure buyers of uniform development and thus a safe investment. Potential buyers were also informed that despite the remoteness of the location, the quality of local shopping was improving and all the downtown department stores made free daily deliveries to West Pullman.

The association's plan for development was working well by 1900. West Pullman was growing rapidly, its school had more than doubled in size, churches and a public library were built. One of the Stewart Ridge houses depicted in the West Pullman promotional booklet is the Stephen Foster home, built in the summer of 1900. In June of 1899, Foster had married Almeda Hodges of Elmhurst, Illinois. He was then living in the Kenwood neighborhood, but as an officer of the West Pullman Land Association, Stewart Ridge was a logical place in which to build a family home. Because Foster's business was downtown, he may have felt that West Pullman would be a good place to spend summers but inconvenient for year-round living. During the fall and winter, the Fosters rented apartments in Hyde Park and in the summer moved to their home on Harvard Avenue. They maintained this pattern of semi-annual moves until 1912 or 1913. In 1914, the Fosters were living in Evanston and in 1915, they moved to Winnetka where Foster died in 1931.

In 1903, the Fosters' daughter Rachel was born. In 1975 or 1976, Rachel Foster Manierre revisited her old home for the first time in conjunction with a tour of Pullman. She subsequently prepared a talk on her visit for presentation at a club meeting. Mrs. Manierre explained that her parents selected Frank Lloyd Wright to design their house through a family connection. In 1894, Wright had designed a house in Hinsdale for Mrs. Manierre's aunt and uncle, the Frederic P. Bagleys. Mr. Bagley was an importer of marble for use in construction, and Mrs. Manierre speculated that her uncle met Wright through his business. She spoke of her parents' admiration for Wright's artistry and the great affection they had for their home, although she herself, hearing Wright lecture years later, found him "old and pompous. . .yes, and boring and conceited too," and wondered if her parents had found him difficult.

Frank Lloyd Wright and the Influence of Japan

In *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age* (1958), Grant Carpenter Manson describes the Foster House and its barn, built "on a prairie in the remote regions of southwestern Chicago then known as West Pullman" as the most important of the small group of houses Wright designed with overtly Japanese detailing just after the turn of the century. He goes on to say, "they belong neither to the transitional period [of the late 1890s] nor to that which followed; they are sports, in a class by themselves, but very revealing." Wright may have first encountered Japanese architecture as a nine-year-old boy visiting the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition with his family. When Wright first moved to

Chicago in 1887, he worked for architect J.L. Silsbee, an appreciative owner of Oriental art as were many people at the time for reasons of personal interest or fashion. Wright certainly saw Japanese architecture in 1893 at the Chicago fair. Japanese products were displayed in several of the major fair buildings, demonstrating the nation's achievements in agriculture and industry. A Japanese village was part of the amusement area along the Midway Plaisance. But on Wooded Island in the main lagoon was the official Japanese exhibit, a tea house and the Ho-o-den, or Phoenix Villa. This three-part building was based on the Ho-o-do, or Phoenix Hall, an eleventh-century temple near Kyoto which was an important milestone in the development of a native Japanese architecture (rather than one based on Chinese and Korean styles). The interiors of the three pavilions were designed to reflect three different periods of Japanese design and decoration. After the fair closed in 1894, the buildings on Wooded Island remained standing as a museum and tea garden until they were damaged by fire in 1946 and had to be demolished. As Clay Lancaster points out in *The Japanese Influence in America*, architects from all over America saw these buildings during the fair, but Chicago architects continued to see them for fifty years, and their greatest influence was on the architects of Chicago.

From 1888 to 1893, Wright worked for the architectural firm of Adler and Sullivan, after which he opened his own office. He furthered his interest in things Japanese by purchasing, and later dealing in, Japanese prints, developing an extensive collection by the time of his first trip to Japan in 1905 for the purpose of adding to his collection. In 1906, the Art Institute of Chicago presented *Hirosige: An Exhibition of Color Prints from the Collection of Frank Lloyd Wright*, a display of 213 prints made between 1740 and 1820. A second exhibition of his prints took place at the Art Institute in 1908 and a third in 1915 in the Fine Arts Building. In his introductions to the exhibits, Wright explains his attraction to Japanese prints and design. These prints, he wrote, were produced as inexpensive entertainment for the common man and are democratic, both in subject matter and in their intended audience. They represent "art not divorced from nature." The prints have "a simplifying light, spiritual in quality [which] has come through them to unburden the Western mind sagging with its sordid load."

Several magazine articles in the 1890s had pointed out the Japanese awareness of "the value of commonplace materials in creating a pleasant environment," and that "restraint heightens the effect of whatever accents are selected for a room," as Clay Lancaster writes. Wright found an organic quality in Japanese design which reinforced his own developing ideas about what architecture should be. Principles such as an emphasis on the quality of craftsmanship as an intrinsic, not an extrinsic, feature of design; simplicity and the use of materials in their natural state; openness within the house and in the relationship of the house to its site found a receptive place in Wright's thinking. He was also attracted to specific details such as the use of deep eaves with light-colored undersides to block the sun's glare while directing light to the interior; careful selection and placement of a limited number of decorative objects within a room; and low furniture. What Wright learned from Japanese architecture, according to Grant Manson, was "a highly provocative clue to a fresh concept of Western architecture: the interplay of solid structure with unprecedented quantities of light and atmosphere." Wright found in Japanese art and

architecture a tradition that supported and expanded his own concepts, and in the Foster House he explored these ideas.

The Foster House and Barn

Wright was not the only architect whose work in the 1890s showed some Japanese influence. An Oriental feeling was apparent in the Shingle Style buildings of the 1880s-90s, a style particularly popular in New England but also the style in which Wright built his own house in Oak Park in 1889. Ground-hugging houses with prominent, sheltering roofs, Shingle Style residences featured floor plans that, unlike the standard late nineteenth-century residence with its sequence of box-like rooms, separated principal rooms with only minimal partitions or with screens. The style takes its name from the wood shingles which covered most or all of the exterior of these houses. After leaving Adler and Sullivan in 1893, Wright designed other houses in the Shingle Style, as well as in the more formal Colonial revival style. At the same time, he was also working out his own unique style, derived from his experience with Sullivan and his desire to find a style more appropriate to the modern era and the Midwestern locale than these borrowings from the East and the past. Wright's borrowings from the Far East were experiments that contributed to the development of his architectural thought and practice and through him to other architects whose work formed the Prairie school.

In its siting, plan, and composition, the Foster House exhibits features of the Shingle Style as well as characteristics of typical summer homes, yet it clearly demonstrates the creativity of Wright's architectural philosophy as it was then developing. The house and its barn, a miniature version of the house, are located on a large corner lot with landscaping on all sides of the structures. The gentle battering of the walls and the picturesque upward curve of the roofs, based on the Japanese *irimoya* roof, covered in shingles and accented with dark wood trim express the relationship of the house to the ground and the overall context of the landscaped site. The base of the building, eight rows of shingles above a dark sill, extends out from the main body of the house at either end to form the entrance stair at one end and a porch at the other. A band of dark trim tops these rows of shingles, emphasizing the solidity of the base and its rootedness in the ground.

Unlike most summer homes of the period, the Foster House did not have the typical street-front entry set into a broad porch. Here the entry is located at the side of the house, covered by a low roof with a screen of closely set narrow spindles on either side of the stairs. The open porch was set at the opposite end of the house, its outer corners marked by the same narrow spindles as the stairs. Glass doors lead from the interior of the house to the porch, making the porch an extension of the interior space rather than an applied appendage, tying together the inside and out-of-doors.

The interior plan of the house reflected the simplicity and lack of formality characteristic of summer homes. Its combination living and dining room also reflects a flexible room usage of traditional Japanese homes. This room, extending the width of the house

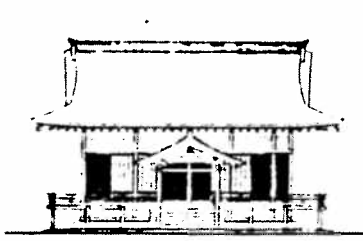
and opening onto the porch, centers on a broad brick fireplace with a pointed-arch opening and a wooden mantel inset above the keystone. According to notes on the back of a Foster family photograph, the woodwork was stained moss-green, the rough plaster walls tinted buff in the Japanese manner, rather than painted, and matching the bricks of the fireplace. The floor was stained a dark mahogany. In this photograph, the room is furnished with an assortment of furniture in various styles, and in one corner, on a shelf, is at least one piece of Oriental pottery.

Six casement windows, set together in a band at each end of this room, admit considerable light and by providing extensive views of the garden further connect the house to its setting. The picturesque and Japanese atmosphere of the house and its setting begins at the edge of the property. The path to the entrance of the house is marked by a *torii*, the gate found at the entrance to Shinto shrines. Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan, and the *torii* may have evolved from a rope tied between two trees or posts to mark a sacred site. Two posts, modified from the posts and roof of the *torii*, mark the entrance to the driveway alongside the pedestrian gate. The driveway leads to the barn, now a garage, which is a smallscale and simplified version of the house.

In his book *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910*, written a year before Wright's death in 1959, Grant Manson wrote that:

Although the exact degree of Japanese influence on Wright as an architect may never be determined, and may not be known even to Wright himself, it is strongly indicated that "Japan" has been a decisive factor in his growth.

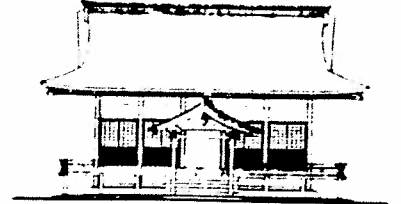
The Foster House is a demonstration of this aspect of Wright's development as an architect. Combining elements of the popular Shingle Style, the fashionable Japanese, and the traditional informality and picturesqueness of a summer cottage, the house illuminates Wright's effort to find his own way in architecture. The Shingle Style came to Wright through the early years of his career. He came to Japanese design through its sensitivity to nature and its honest presentation of the products of nature. Although he designed only a very few buildings with details directly derived from Japan, a Japanese feeling and sensibility is evident in all of his Prairie school designs from the period 1900 to 1914. Through him, other architects such as Walter Burley Griffin, Marion Mahony, George Maher, Richard Schmidt, and all the other members of the Prairie school movement were touched by the same sensibility. Clay Lancaster points out in the 1983 edition of his book that since the first publication of *Japanese Influence in America* in 1963, Japanese-style buildings and gardens have been built in many parts of the United States. The Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe has included a Japanese garden within its developing complex. In 1981, the Chicago Park District reconstructed a Japanese garden on Wooded Island, complete with a small pavilion. In landscape and other fields of design, the enduring appeal of Japanese art and architecture in America is evident.



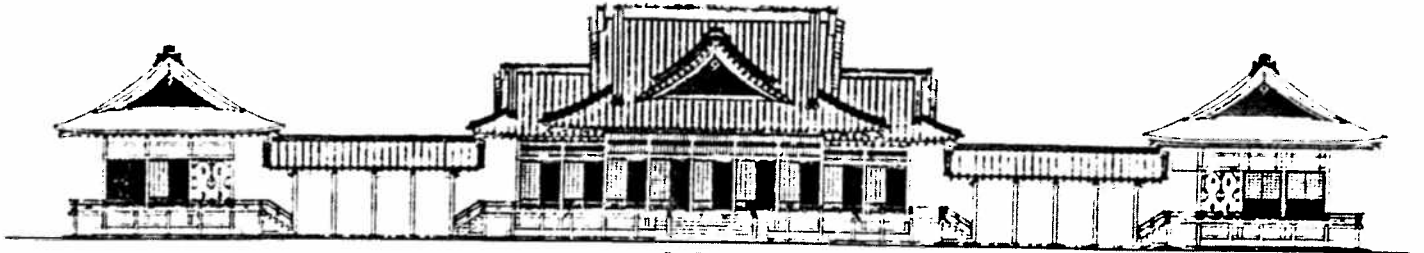
SOUTH ELEVATION OF NORTH BUILDING



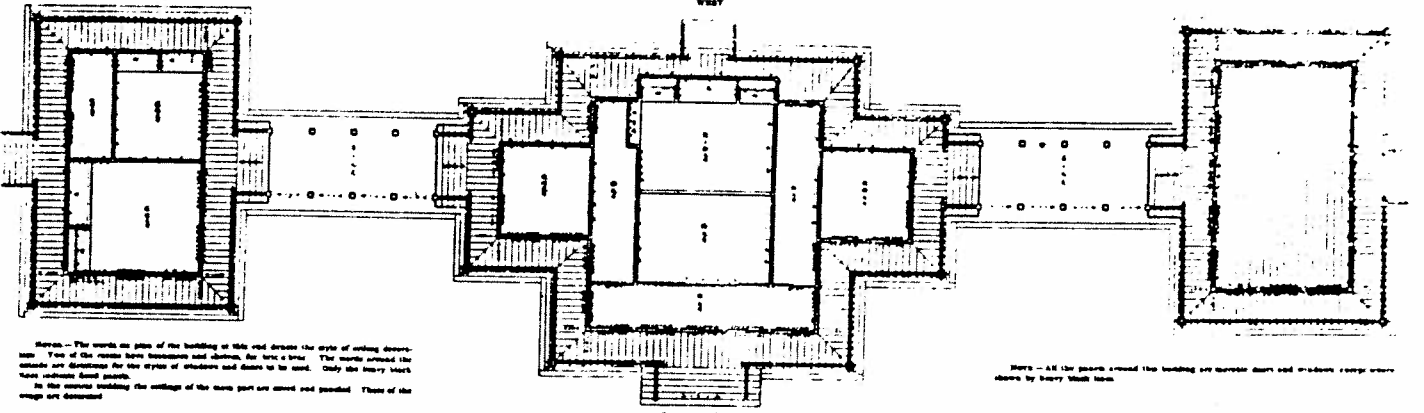
SOUTH ELEVATION OF CENTRAL BUILDING



SOUTH ELEVATION OF SOUTH BUILDING



EAST ELEVATION



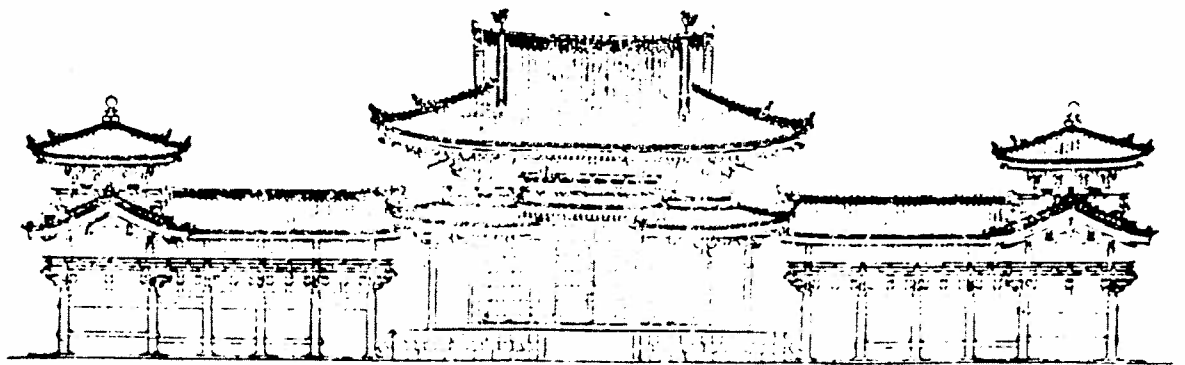
GENERAL PLAN

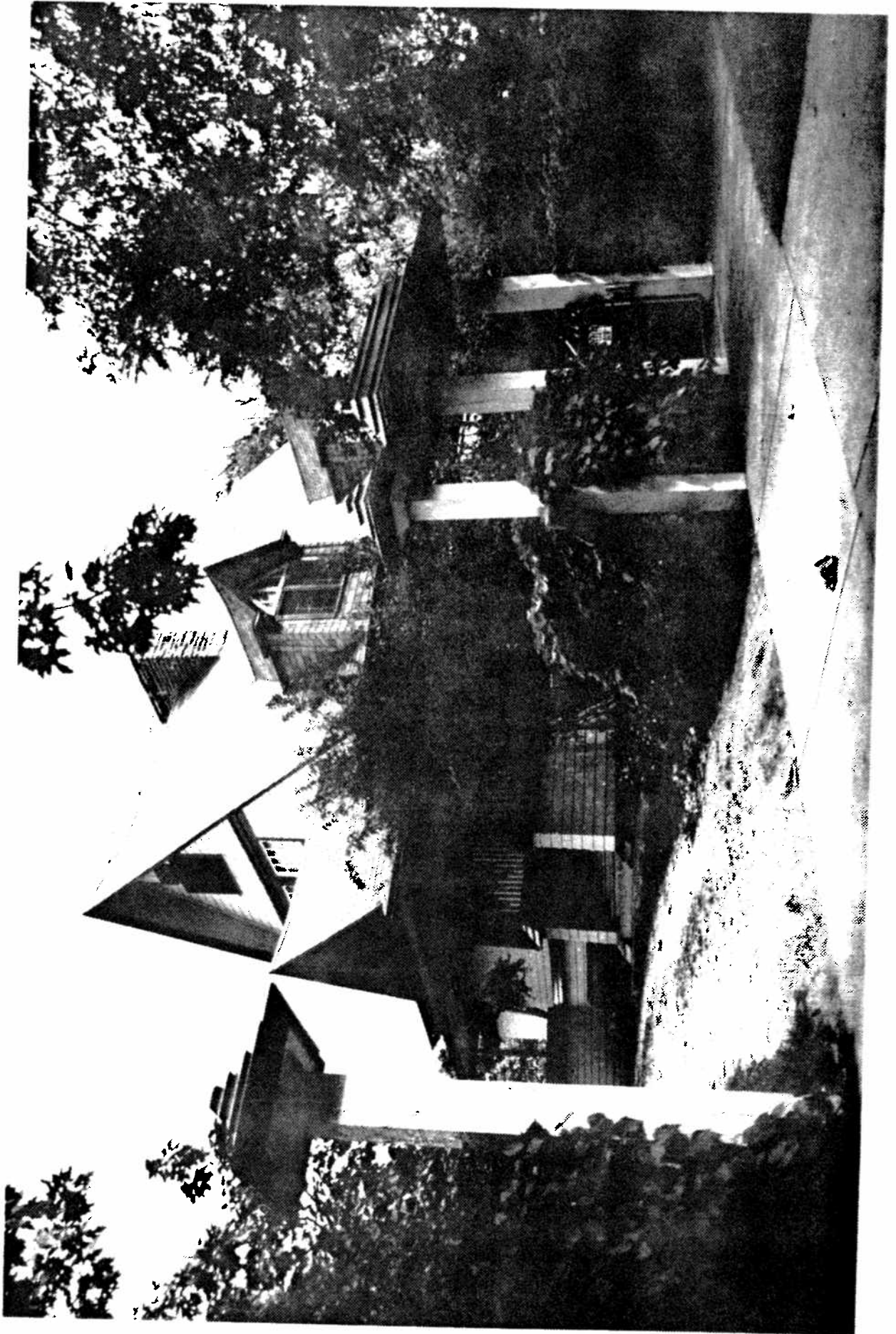
Notes—The words on plan of the building in this end denote the area of walking passage. Two of the rooms have basements and dormers, for two a story. The words around the outside are dimensions for the system of structure and doors to be used. Only the heavy lines have ordinary floor joists. In the central building the ceiling of the main part are slanted and paneled. Those of the wings are demarcated.

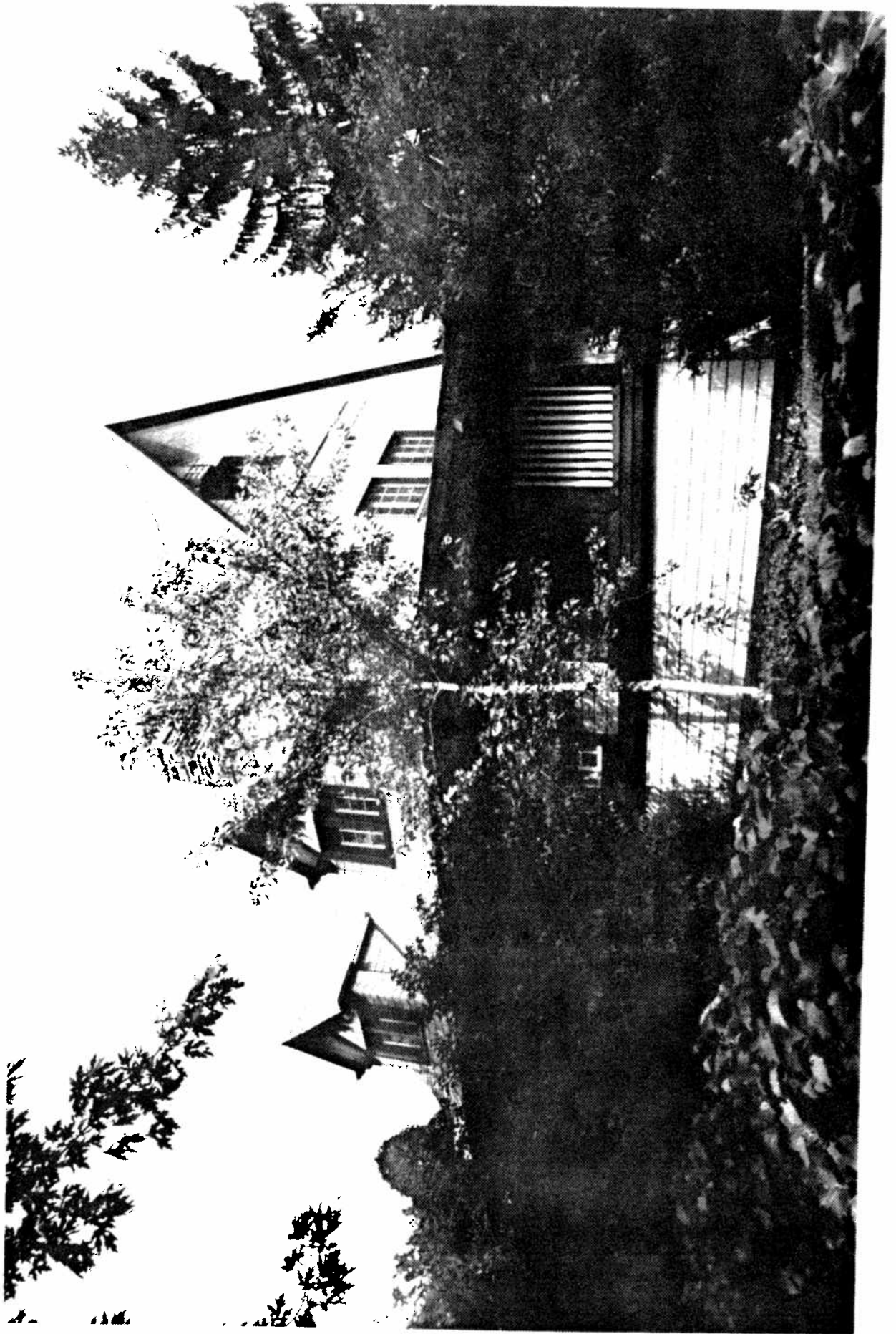
Notes—All the spaces around the building are covered with a wooden veranda except the space in front of the main hall.

§57. Elevation and plan of the Hoo-den or Phoenix Villa, Chicago, M. Kuru, architect. (The Inland Architect and News Record, December, 1892.)

§58. Elevation of the Hoo-dō or Phoenix Hall of the Byōdō-in at Uji. (Sansom, Japan, A Short Cultural History, New York, 1943, p. [252].)













CITY OF CHICAGO

Richard M. Daley, Mayor

COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS

Peter C. B. Bynoe, Chairman

Irving J. Markin, Vice-Chairman

Thomas E. Gray, Secretary

John W. Baird

Marian Despres

Josue Gonzalez

Amy R. Hecker

David R. Mosena

Charles Smith

William M. McLenahan, Director

Room 516

320 North Clark Street

Chicago, Illinois 60610

(312) 744-3200

